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ASSOCIATED PRESS
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By ROBERT PARRY

WASHINGTON

The former deputy CIA director, Bobby R. Inman, says Democrats on the House intelligence committee are protesting elements of the Reagan administration's high-priority drive to expand covert actions abroad.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Inman said this dispute was the underlying reason the committee voted along party lines last month to issue a staff report criticizing U.S. intelligence-gathering in Central America.

Committee officials promptly rejected Inman's claim that disputes over covert action colored the report, saying the staff members who wrote the critique were not even involved in reviewing covert activities.

Although no one disclosed what covert actions were protested, Inman's statement is the first time any ranking member of the U.S. intelligence community has suggested that an oversight committee has made a series of objections about ongoing operations.

Inman said the committee Democrats have written letters to President Reagan critical of CIA covert actions. He said he believed some of those letters were critical of actions in Central America. Published reports have said Reagan approved a covert action plan for Central America last fall.

Only one critical letter had previously come to light. In July 1981, sources said the committee complained about a plan directed against the radical government of Libya's Moammar Khadafy.

Inman said it was just such protest letters that sparked his concern.

"What really troubles me is that here in the oversight process they have let sharply different views about covert action creep into what appears to be a critique on substantive intelligence," Inman said. "That's what really lies underneath the split and the criticism."

Inman, who resigned as an unpaid consultant to the committee because of the report, also complained that the 23-page document reflected a bias against U.S. policy in Central America.

He also complained that it failed to say a key House briefing on alleged outside control of the Salvadoran insurgency was given by operational officials "deeply enmeshed" in covert actions, not by intelligence analysts.

Inman, a retired Navy admiral who stepped down as deputy CIA director June 10, said this distinction should have been made because these "operational personnel" are less analytical and less objective than "substantive intelligence people."

However, in a statement issued late Thursday, Rep. Charles Rose, D-N.C., chairman of the Intelligence oversight subcommittee, said only two of 18

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intelligence officers at the closed March 4 briefing were "operational" personnel.

"Admiral Inman's description of the March 4 briefing is simply incorrect," Rose said. "The committee has never received a briefing that was more formal, elaborate or high level. The top analytic spokesmen for each of the intelligence agencies were present. ...

"It is surprising that Admiral Inman, who has such an excellent memory, is confused about this briefing. The March 4 briefing was a major event."

The report cited four claims made at that briefing as examples of simplistic and overstated intelligence by U.S. spy agencies in their reporting on Central America.

The briefing was given after then-Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. asserted that the command and control of the insurgency in El Salvador was in the hands of "non-Salvadorans."

It also came at a time when the administration was stepping up its efforts to persuade Congress and the American public that Cuba and leftist Nicaragua were trying to subvert pro-U.S. governments in Central America.

In contrast to the strong assertions made by the administration at the time, Inman stressed in the interview how tenuous much of the intelligence was.

"You don't have the hard evidence," Inman said. "You're going (to Congress) with very, very little information with which to answer their questions. Other committees may not know that, but this is the committee that authorizes, so they damn well should know it. ...

"In all the briefings I gave I stressed how limited and tenuous so much of the evidence was. But one pieced together, as we do in most intelligence problems, with what bits and pieces you had."

As to the command-and-control issue, Inman said the domination by non-Salvadorans was "never certain" and that "some confusion on (Haig's) part added to the problem. ...

"The fact that the operations are being directed from outside El Salvador and that there is heavy involvement of non-Salvadorans in that process is not in doubt. That does not say there are no Salvadorans involved in command and control from the outside."

Inman said he was "not happy" with the March 4 briefing which he described as "disorganized." He said questions as to why operations personnel would give a briefing on an intelligence issue should be directed to CIA director William J. Casey.

CIA spokesman Dale Peterson said the agency would have no comment.

Asked if he spoke up at any point during the briefing, Inman said he arrived late and added, "that may have been one of the occasions when they accused me of pulling up my socks" — a reference to his personal habit of adjusting his socks when he's in an uncomfortable situation.

Committee officials, however, said the still-secret transcript indicates that Inman was present at or near the start and spoke frequently.

Inman said most of his comments stressed the limited nature of much of the available intelligence.